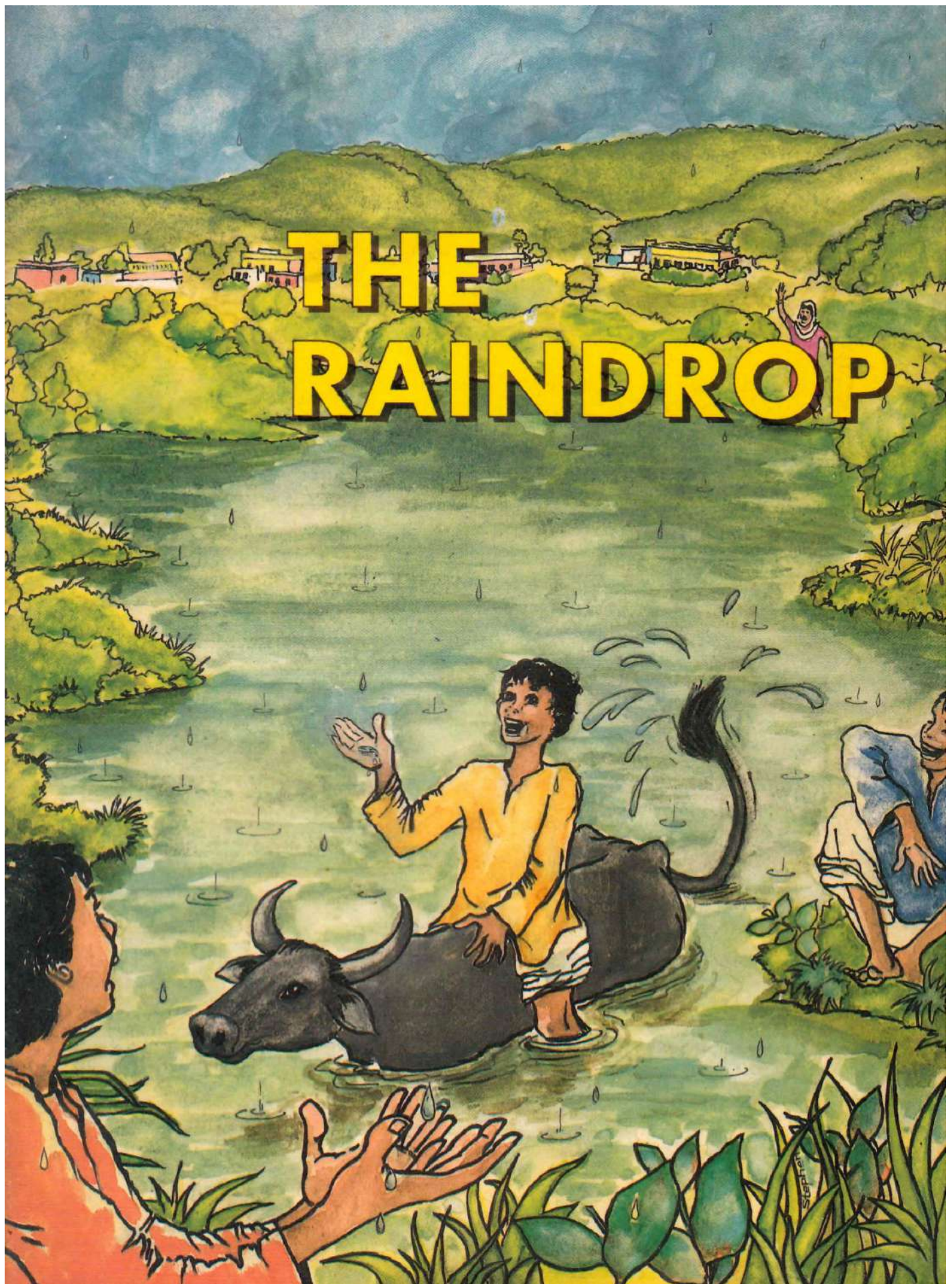


THE RAINDROP





C S E

This book is the second in a series of books for children on environment. This project and the idea for this story has been conceptualised by Anil Agarwal of the Centre for Science and Environment and aims to generate literature on nature-society interactions for children. It is based on an actual village but names have been changed except that of P. R. Mishra to protect individual identities.

We are grateful to P. R. Mishra, Madhu Sarin, Jethu Ram and the residents of Sukhomajri for their co-operation.

We are grateful to the Royal Netherlands Embassy, New Delhi and the Swedish International Development Agency for financial support.

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Production assistance by K.S.L.Srinivasan, Yashpal and V.S.Rao

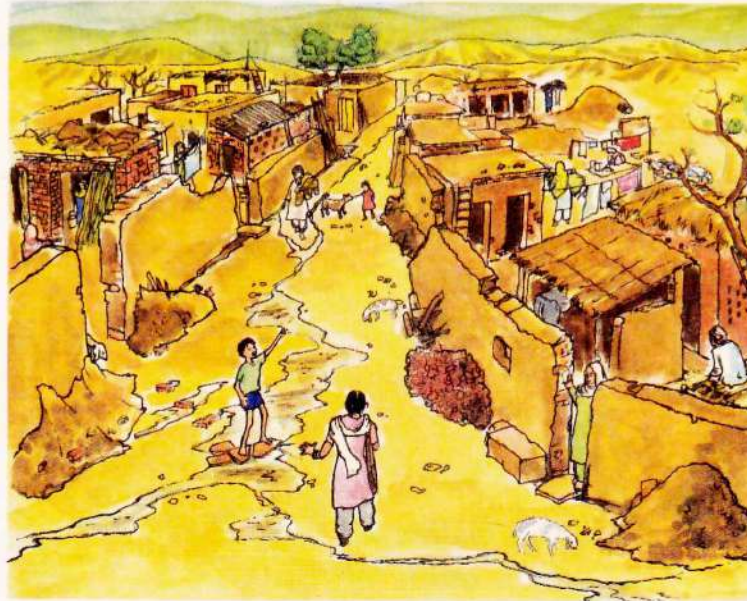
Illustrations by Reenie, cover and colour illustrations by Stephen Marrazi

Published by:
Centre for Science and Environment
F-6, Kailash Colony, New Delhi - 110048

Produced by:
Creative Learning for Change
S-286, Greater Kailash-II, New Delhi - 110048
Kaushalya Ramdas is an associate member of CLC

Printed by:
PS Press Services (P) Ltd.,
C-161, Okhla Industrial Area Phase-I, New Delhi - 110020

THE RAINDROP



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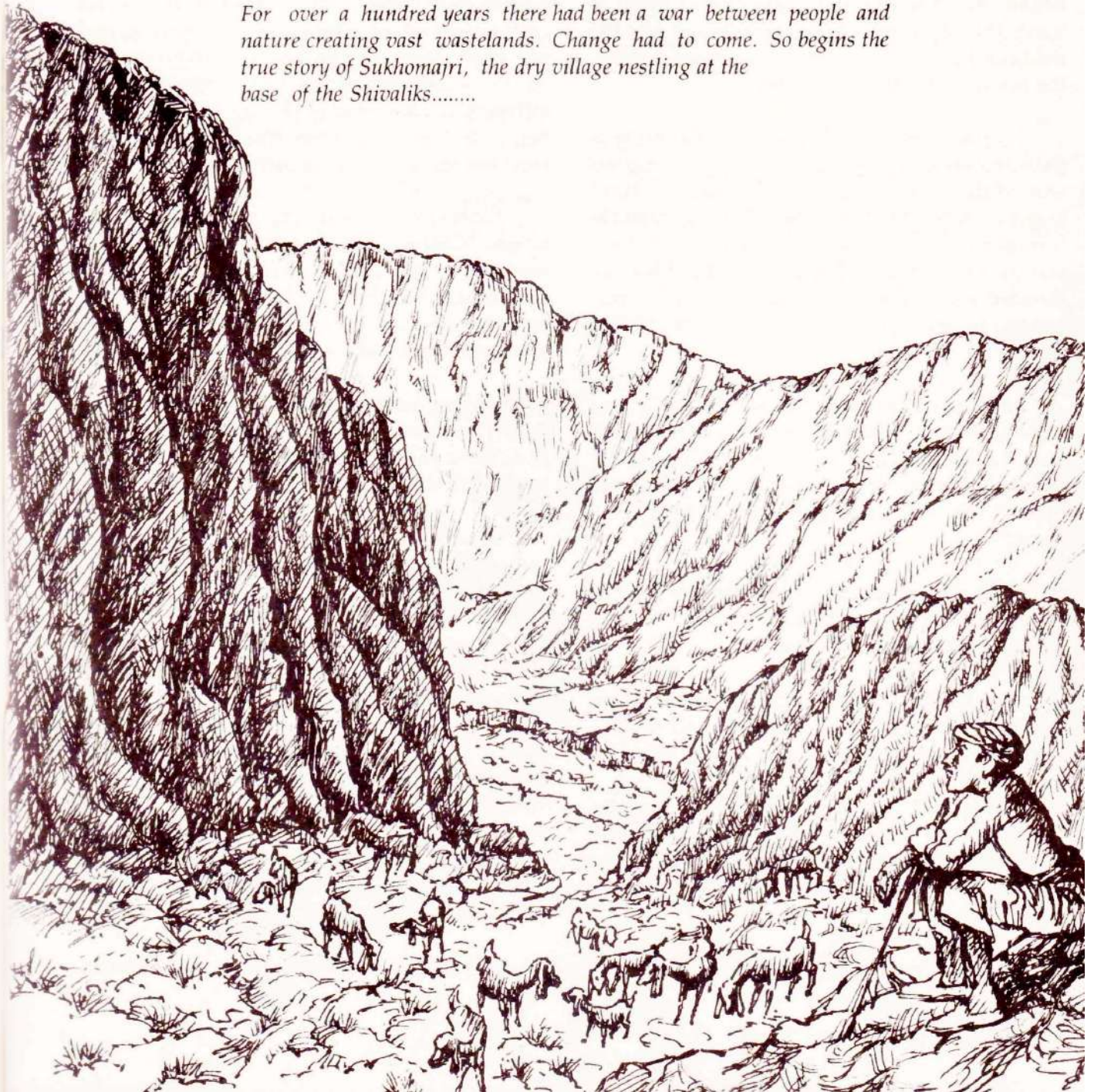
Centre for Science and Environment

*To the children who experience
the reality of living
and working in rural India.*

Strange shapes stood out against the sky. Odd lines and forms were outlined between the deep gorges and crevices. Some looked like rugged and twisted faces with long noses, others like large crumbling ant hills, with funny designs made by the wind. Loose, powdery mud was blowing everywhere.

Looking down while standing on the small hills, the surface below resembled a 'brown' moon. The hills looked like broken bread with ridges that seemed to have holes made into them by dirty fingers. At places the ground caved into open spaces from which dark tunnels led inside the earth.

For over a hundred years there had been a war between people and nature creating vast wastelands. Change had to come. So begins the true story of Sukhomajri, the dry village nestling at the base of the Shivaliks.....



THE ACCIDENT

There was an echo in the bare, mud hills of young voices rising in a sing-song chant... *Ik ... Do... Teen... Char... Panj*. A bee-eater suddenly looped in the air — a splash of green and brown with a long pin-like tail.

Low clouds rumbled and a slight drizzle began. Another monsoon season had come to wash the mud away from the hills and into the fields and plains below. As it continued raining, the hills became soft and soggy.

Shepherd boys played their regular game of hide-and-seek in the gullies, while their goats wound their way up the steep hillsides. Hard hooves scraped the loose mud. Hungry mouths browsed on meagre shrubs, pulling them right out by their roots. Their constant bleating blended with the wind, producing a rhythm that seemed to belong only to these large, crumbling hills.

Suddenly, the cry "*Bachao! bachao!*" rang through the air, bringing the game of hide-and-seek to an abrupt end. "What happened?" shouted young Partap. "Where are Sonu and Monu? Oh, my God! The hillside has fallen away!"

"They have fallen down and there is mud all over them," whispered Dalip, leaning over the edge, his eyes wide with fear.

The muffled voices of the two boys came through layers of mud. "Please, call *Masiji*," cried Inder, tears rolling down his fat cheeks.

Sturdy and long-legged Partap leaned over Dalip, who sat helplessly. Partap was strong for a six-year old, in contrast to Dalip whose large frightened eyes completely dominated his tiny face.

"You all look after Sonu and Monu," said

Partap, taking charge of the situation. "I'll go and call *Chachaji* and *Masiji*." Drenched by the rain, Partap sped through scrub and mud gullies, as sure footed as his goats.

Situated amidst an eroded landscape, the village of Sukhomajri looked uncared for. All the houses were made of mud. They were old and cracks showed, as a new coat of cowdung had not been done for the last two winters. The monsoon had only added to the problems of the villagers, as the roofs of the low mud huts had begun to leak. The lanes and bylanes outside their homes had pools of dirty rain water.

Panting and red in the face, he shouted as he ran, "*Chachaji, Chacha, Masiji*, come quick." It was not easy running through the slush of Sukhomajri, but the thought of his friends lying buried in the mud, kept Partap going until he reached Sonu's and Monu's hut.

Banging hard on the small, cracked wooden door, he shouted "*Masi... Masiji...* come, quickly. Both Sonu and Monu have fallen and are lying trapped under the mud."

"What's happened?" asked *Masi*, opening the door. *Chacha's* worried face appeared in the doorway.

Partap grabbed their hands and pulled them along. "Come quickly and I'll tell you. But please walk very, very fast."

On hearing the commotion, a neighbour, Gurindar Kaur, opened her door, and asked, "*Oh, Masiji, ki hoya?*"

"Partap says that Sonu and Monu have fallen. Please come along and get *Bhai Saheb* also," said *Masi* in a choked voice.

As *Masi* and *Chacha* kept pace with Partap,

Gurindar Kaur and her husband Kartar Singh, better known as *Bhai Saheb* in the village, caught up with them.

"Oh! *Sab log aayo*," shouted *Bhai Saheb*, swinging his big *danda*. "The children have had an accident."

Soon the lanes were crowded. Not a word could be made out with everyone talking at the same time. All feet ran in one direction.

Masi kept chanting "*Hai, Ram!*" and Gurindar Kaur, "*Wahe Guru!*" She put her arm around *Masi's* shoulder. Partap led the way, shouting, "this way, here .. here...it's just around the corner."

Worried and concerned the villagers crowded around the place of the accident and

looked to where Inder and Dalip pointed helplessly. Sonu and Monu were lying in a gully at least twelve feet below.

"Has anybody got a thick rope?"

"I wish Daulat Ram had been here today. Where has he gone?"

"He has gone to Kalka to sell his goats. He would have known what to do now."

"More and more of these accidents are taking place," said someone from the crowd.

"*Mere bache!*, *mere bache!*," sobbed *Masi*. "Keep away, *Bhainji*," *Bhai Saheb* said untying his *pagri*.

Holding on to one end, he lowered the five



yards of cloth into the gully. Then he called out to Sonu and Monu to hold on to the other end so they could be pulled up one at a time.

Sonu, lying on top, had managed to pull himself a little out of the mud despite having bruised his arms, leg and back. Monu kept crying in pain. He could not move his leg and seemed to have broken it. His little goat lay under him not moving at all. *Chacha* and four more villagers lined up behind *Bhai Saheb*, holding each other by the waist.

Then, after Sonu had helped Monu to hold tight to the dangling *pagri*, they gently helped him up even though he shrieked with pain. Sonu was pulled up next, with the dead goat under one arm.

Chacha looked at his sons and with a voice full of concern said, "Monu's leg is swollen. He has definitely broken it."

Masi said, "We'll have to tie it up here with a clean cloth and take him to a dispensary at Pinjore. That's at least five or six kilometres away. *Bhai Saheb*, can we borrow your cart to take Monu there?"

Meanwhile, *Gurindar Kaur* advised *Masi*, "Take Sonu home, wash his bruises and apply *haldi* paste on them." She also told *Masi* to give Sonu a glass of hot goat's milk, with lots of sugar and a pinch of *haldi*. Sonu will get alright, but I'm worried about Monu," said the kindly neighbour.

With mixed feelings of concern and anger, *Chacha* scolded the pair, "We've told you not to come so far out when it rains, because the rain has been breaking this earth and washing it away for many years now."

The villagers joined in, muttering and grumbling about how their lands and forests had come to this sorry state in just fifteen years.

Some one pointed out that as there were

only few fields left for *kheti-bari*, the boys had to take the goats to graze to the far mud gullies, as grass for grazing was becoming less near the village.

All the villagers owned goats, which they would sell at the *Kalka bazaar*, to add to their meagre incomes.

The buzzing voices grew louder and more disgruntled, as they walked back to the village. *Bhai Saheb* held Monu in his arms and though the child was trying to be brave, he kept asking for his baby goat.

"When the Gods are kind we get the rains. With barely one crop, and hardly any water, firewood or fodder throughout the year, life is becoming more and more difficult," said one villager.





Added another, "And, now all this mud is getting loose and starting to crumble. It also gets washed away more and more with each rain."

"With all these hardships," one villager complained, "our boys will soon have to move into the *shahar* and start working there as coolies or in factories, just as Milkha Singh and Kishan Chand did last year."

"Soon our houses will crumble," warned Masi. "Today, my child has broken his leg in these gullies. Tomorrow, our whole village will get buried under this mud."

She looked around and saw large holes in

the ground, resembling manholes in a city.

The cracks in the dry earth were filling up with the rain water. The water softened the mud and washed it away. There were few shrubs or trees whose roots could hold the soil. The distant hills were hidden in a haze and only their peaks were green.

Chacha looked at her and said "Now we've lost the goat and so we've lost some more money."

Sighing and nodding their heads, they walked on silently. The rain increased and already by the sides of the small, winding path, rivers of mud were flowing.

VISITORS FROM THE CITY

It was the autumn of 1974. Six years had passed since the game of hide and seek and Monu's accident. However only the last few months saw hectic activity in Chandigarh, about 30 kilometres from Sukhomajri. Bold print from the city's leading newspapers read "LOOMING WATER CRISIS".

As water taps dried up, rationing of water led housewives on a buying spree for extra buckets! City folks were becoming alarmed as "No Boating" and "No Swimming" signs came up. The pride of the city, Sukhna lake, situated at one end of Chandigarh was silting up. Municipal officials and soil and water experts held emergency meetings and inspected the lake. Mr Mishra and his team were given the responsibility of finding a solution to Chandigarh's water problem.

They stopped their jeeps at the other end of the lake and started walking towards the hills, searching for an answer to the problem of the lake silting up.

The autumn heralded the coming of a North Indian winter. A cool crispness enveloped the hills, their shadows falling across the countryside that had a luminous glow under the early morning sun. Trees were sparse and could only be seen on the higher slopes of the far hills.

Mr Mishra, who headed the experts, was a kind-hearted man, who firmly believed that each tree was a

poem. He knew that if people cared for nature, then nature would care for them.

The team consisted of officials and scientists from the departments of soil and forests. Accompanying the team were Anwar, a junior technician and Manju, a young journalist. Both Anwar and Manju were eager to explore the other side of the lake and the hills beyond.

"We'll have to travel through this entire area and go beyond those rocks." Mishraji told the group. "The answer must lie in the hills beyond".

"Do you think we'll find out why the lake has silted up, by going so far away from it?" Manju wondered.

The team members spread out in pairs, to search the area, but not really knowing what to look for. The low-lying area at the edge of the lake was marshy and



their shoes became caked with mud. As they neared the hills, the earth felt like clay. Only the noisy monotonous chirruping of a group of babblers broke the silence. The group walked on and the land became drier, dotted with many *kikar* trees, some vegetation and a few fields.

Walking immediately behind Mishraji was Anwar who exclaimed, "Oh! my foot has got stuck in the loose mud. I'm glad I wore my sneakers!"

"Yes, Anwar," Mishraji responded, "have you been noticing how the quality of soil is changing? As we walk towards the hills, the earth is getting drier and more sandy."

With a final effort, the group reached the big rocks at the foot of the hills. "Let's go around," said Mishraji, leading the way.

Suddenly, they stopped in their tracks, their eyes not believing what they beheld. In front of them was a dry, denuded, uneven landscape, with some parched sandy fields. At the far end rose the hills — loose, mud hills, that seemed to be cut into pieces with tall, bare, straight walls and gullies that cut ravines into the eroded land. There was not a stream in sight. Anwar broke the shocked silence, "These look more like large ant hills. Where are the famous water *chos* of the Shivaliks?"

"Gone! Vanished into the earth," said Mishraji.

As they walked through dry infertile fields, Mishraji and Manju pushed ahead and the others struggled to keep pace. Mishraji looked around with a keen eye and commented, "Manju, have you noticed that the farmers of this village have started losing their fields? Cultivation has reached the steep hilly slopes." He walked ahead a few steps and continued, "this is leading to further erosion, and even the little vegetation there is, is being lost. The top soil must be getting

washed away in the rain and mud must be piling up in the fields."

"Yes", Manju replied. "There is hardly any greenery. Just look at the vast number of goats grazing on the slopes".

"You know, that also is very important. To find fodder, goats are quick to graze in forest area. This does not allow natural growth and leads to the creation of wasteland." said Mishraji.

"Very interesting," Manju nodded.

The forest department officials, meanwhile, looked sheepishly at the goats and the eroded landscape and felt guilty because they had not been doing their job.

"Let's climb further. We must get to a higher level. "There", said Mishraji pointing, "We'll be able to see the area better from there".

Another hour's walk took them higher and right into the gullies. They had covered about fifteen kilometres from the edge of the lake. Standing at the head of a *cho*, Mishraji sadly surveyed the bare surroundings. He remembered this area from his childhood, when he had visited it frequently during the summer holidays along with his grandparents. Then, these hills were thickly forested and watered by gurgling streams.

But this was no longer so. There was no greenery; landslides had scarred the hills and the sound of flowing water had been stilled. How carelessly human beings plunder nature to meet their own needs. Mishraji sighed and turned to Anwar and said "It looks like a maze of ant hills. There is a village down below. Let's go and meet its people."

The sight of so many people walking towards Sukhomajri created quite a stir. At the outskirts of the village were young Partap,

now a tall twelve-year-old, with Sonu, Monu, Inder, Dalip and their goats. The boys stopped to stare at the visitors and Partap very confidently said, "They must be the *sarkari afsars* come again. *Bauji* was saying they do nothing but talk".

Monu, limping slightly, asked, "Who are these *afsar log*? Why have they come?" Sonu came hurrying from behind -- "Leave them ... come on, let's go home. Partap, please don't start arguing."

"Let's block the road with our goats," said Partap.

The city-dwellers had never seen so many goats together at one time, milling about right in front of them and bleating loudly. Anwar couldn't help laughing, but it was not amusing the officials!

"*Namaste*", Partap greeted the group. "What have you come for? Who do you want to see?"

"We would like to meet your elders. Can you take us to them," Mishraji replied.

"They are working in the fields. Is the matter important? Where have you come from?" Partap questioned firmly. Then, turning to Inder and Sonu, he said, "You two go and call my *Bauji*, *Bhai Saheb* and *Chacha*. Come, *Sahibjis*, you all come with us. We'll go and sit under our big tree and wait for them." The visitors shooed the goats out of their way, skirted the mud houses and came to an open space with a huge mango tree. "Whew! What a tree," remarked Anwar. "It must be over two hundred years old."

"Yes, more than that," Partap responded. Then, straightening a *charpai*, whose ropes had snapped he said, "Please, sit. This is the only big tree left in our area. We really look after it. It has quite a history. My grandfather's great-grandfather planted it. Today, only our family can enjoy its fruit, though the rest of the villagers can enjoy its cool shade and the

breeze under the spread of its big branches." Unable to resist his curiosity, Partap asked "Why have so many of you come? Normally, we see the *patwari* from Pinjore and one other big *sahib* from Chandigarh. Nobody else bothers to come here."

Sitting on the *charpai*, Manju called out to the other two boys. Smiling at them, she tried to make friends with them and said, "Where were you boys coming from just now?"

Picking up courage, Monu, smiled back and limped forward. Short and fat, Dalip hung back, his large eyes shining curiously. "We are coming from the hills. We take our goats there every day for grazing," said Monu.

"Do you go to school? Do you get the time?" asked Manju.

"Only some of us do," Monu replied. "We attend the afternoon shift in Pinjore after our work is done in the morning. Partap, the boy who is talking to *Sahib*, is the best student in our village."

"Will you take me to your home? I would like to meet your mother."

Before Monu could reply, their conversation was interrupted by the arrival of three men. Inder and Sonu ran in front of them, chanting, "They have come! We have brought them."

All three men were dressed in old and frayed *kurtas*, narrow *pyjamas* and had *pagris* wound around their heads. They were *Bauji* or Daulat Ram, Partap's foster father; *Bhai Saheb* or Kartar Singh and *Chacha*, who was Sonu's and Monu's father.

Partap made the introductions as the people from the city and the three villagers settled down under the branches of the mango tree which cast a cool shade. With hands folded in greeting, Daulat Ram said, "*Namaste*. What can we do for you, *Sahib*?"

THE MEETING UNDER THE MANGO TREE

Feeling important because he was taking part in a grown-up discussion, Partap found a place to sit from where he could listen to the talk.

Mishraji opened the conversation "We have come from Chandigarh. We wanted to meet you as we all have a common problem. We also need to do a study of the area surrounding your village."

"Hahn-ji, Sahibji, how can we help? What would you like from us?" asked Daulat Ram.

"Our study," replied Mishraji, "is really regarding those ugly bare hills that no longer have a single tree on them. Hill sides are crumbling and forming dangerous gullies around your village. Loose earth is carried away down these gullies and is getting piled up in your fields. I am sure this erosion must be making farming difficult. The water has also dried up within the earth. We want to study your area and try and bring back the green look, improve the land and solve the water problem."

"Why are you interested in us?" asked *Bhai Saheb*. "After all, you are from the *sarkar*. How can poor people like us take part in your study and be of any help to you?"

"Our lake in Chandigarh is getting choked with the mud falling into it from your side," Mishraji explained. The lake is the main source of water to the city. Our water supply is being affected. The people are having a very difficult time without water. We have to store water even for our daily needs. We have to find out how we can solve this problem of water shortage."

"How is it our fault and how does it affect us?" asked a worried *Bhai Saheb*. "We have to worry about our survival, not your water

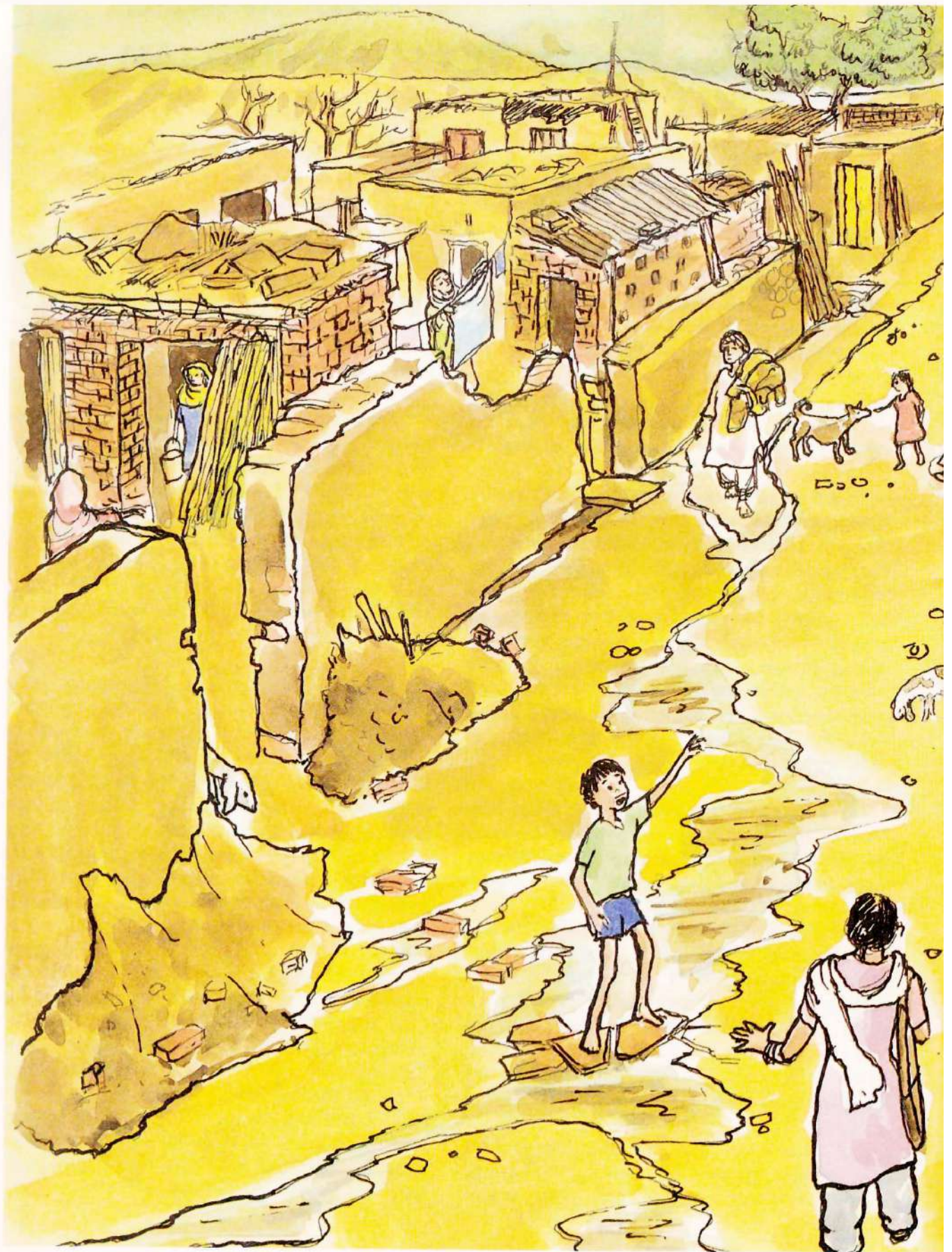
supply. Our women have to walk far to collect a little water and even that does not meet our requirements."

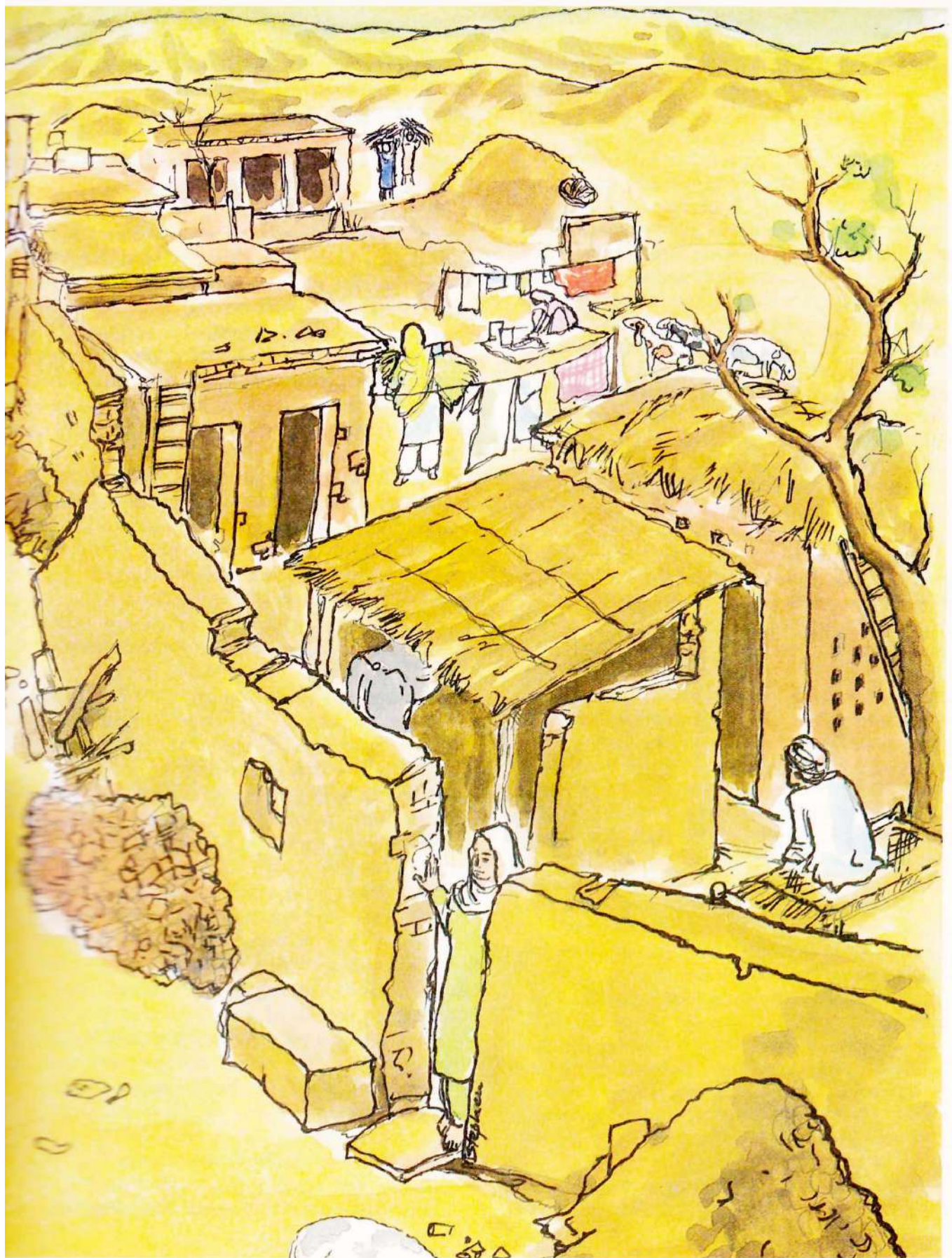
Chacha's loud voice rose above the others. "These must be the same *sarkari babus* who came just before the rains inquiring about our fields. Imagine, they even had the nerve to ask us to move somewhere else because the land was being washed away so fast."

"No, no, it's not your fault and neither have we come to take any land away from you. Let's not misunderstand each other" said Mishraji. Trying to sound reassuring, he went on, "You see we're from an organization that studies and looks after soil and water. In studying the problem of the Sukhna lake, we may also be able to study your soil, water and erosion problems. We need your help and we can all benefit by this work."

Daulat Ram was serious. "Normally, when such work is undertaken, the villagers never benefit. Our fields and hills are just crumbling down and being washed away. We continue to plough the infertile hill slopes because of land shortage. The yield is so little that in order to survive in this barren land, we have to keep a large stock of goats for sale. We can't keep cows and buffaloes for milk as even grass doesn't grow here. It's a hard life for us, *Sahibji*."

Despite the rising sun and much work left unattended, the word had gone around to the huts and fields that the *sarkar* had come. The villagers crowded under the mango tree, curious and attentive. The five boys had wriggled their way to the front and were all ears, but only to be told, "Why don't you boys take these goats back to the huts? They are a nuisance just now. And, also bring some *lassi* for our guests from our houses."





Monu and Dalip volunteered to do the job. "You wanted to visit my house and meet my mother. Would you like to come?" Monu asked Manju.

Thrilled at how easily she had made a friend, Manju jumped up and said, "Of course, I'll come." As she walked away from the mango tree along with the two boys and their goats, she marvelled at the skill with which they kept the goats under control while herding them down the path through the fields. Deep in thought, she tried to interrelate the environment to its people and the conversation she had heard under the mango tree. Manju noticed that the dry, parched fields were being prepared for sowing the winter wheat. She was told that if the winter rain did not come again this year, the fields would yield less grain.

Monu led Manju down the winding path to the dilapidated mud huts. "*Masiji*, *Masiji*," he called out to his mother as they walked through a wooden doorway into an open space.

Masi and her neighbour, Gurindar Kaur, were darning and patching old blankets with great skill, in anticipation of the coming winter.

"Yes, *beta*," she said, standing up on seeing that Monu had brought a woman guest.

"*Masi*, she has come from the big city. She is very nice and wanted to meet you. Lots of *afsar log* have also come. They are talking with the men under the mango tree," Monu rattled on while Dalip tied the five goats to a pole.

Masi's warm welcome and smiling, gentle face touched the city-bred Manju. Bustling about, *Masi* dusted a *charpai* and spread a worn out *khes* on it.

"Please sit. Monu, bring a glass of *lassi* from the *matka*."

Monu went into the house and came out with a tall glass of *lassi*, which he offered to Manju. "I have to take many *lotas* of *lassi* for the other guests," he said and sped away with Dalip to collect more from other homes.

The two village women wore the same type of *salwar-kameez* as Manju but the similarity ended there. The cloth was different and so was the cut of the long shirt. Manju wore a thin, matching coloured *dupatta*, but the village woman preferred a heavy, *chaddar*-like covering in dark colours. Manju sat on the *charpai* and said, "Thank you. Your children are very helpful and seem to be very busy. I'm glad you still send them to school."

"Yes, *Bhainji*," said Gurindar Kaur. "We all have to work very hard from dawn to dusk. Even our children are kept busy with work in the village. Our chores of collecting fuel and fodder never seem to end. But what brings you here?"

"We are a team of workers from the city", Manju explained. "We want to study your area and come to know how you get your water, fuel and fodder."

"How is our fuel and fodder your concern? We have to go far to collect twigs to keep the fires burning and, cooking takes much time on such low flames."

"My dear," said *Masi*, in a philosophical mood. "Your study won't cure our parched fields and broken hillsides. The mud gets washed away and our children get hurt. It seems the Gods are not pleased with us."

"But still, we all have to do something to bring new life to the fields, hills and forests so that you all can live better here in the village."

"*Hahn*, *Bhainji*. I wish it was so easy."

"We have seen this work done before,"

echoed Gurindar Kaur, a serious look on her face. "The *babus* have come and fenced our land and planted trees. Above all, they check and scold us for entering our own lands. But, then, where do our animals graze and where is the water for our fields?" Monu interrupted, coming to the door and saying "I'm going back to the mango tree with the *lassi*. *Memsahib*, will you be coming back with me?"

"I would love to stay. But I think you're right, Monu, I should be getting back," she said. Turning to the women, she took leave of them, "I hope to see more of you all in the following months. *Lassi* never tasted so delicious before. Thank you, *Masi*."

The village woman was touched at being called *Masi* by her guest. "*Rab Rakha, beti*. You must come again."

Carrying the larger *matka* of *lassi*, Manju walked back with the boys. She was glad of the opportunity to meet the women of Sukhomajri in their own homes and thought how different her world was. When the trio neared the mango tree, they were surprised to hear loud and angry voices. Apparently, a heated argument had taken place.

They could hear *Bhai Saheb* saying in an agitated voice, "We have no choice, as we have to make a living from our bare surroundings. You have no right to expect us poor villagers to make sacrifices for the rich city people."

"What we want to do is to improve your bare surroundings. Once trees are planted and erosion is checked by building fences and other structures...."

"Yes, yes," Daulat Ram interrupted. "I have seen many of these casual constructions, since I was a young boy. Nothing lasts long."

"The *babus* come and do some work and disappear. It is not done for our benefit. Just

record books are filled. We still have to live and survive here," said another villager.

"Yes, we remove the wooden posts that get erected," *Chacha* said angrily. "After all, no one provides us with cooking fuel."

"We can do it differently this time," Anwar pleaded. "We will build check dams with large stones placed in step to hold the mud. A whole lot of brushwood and dried, thorny branches can also be put together to form fences."

"What check dams, *Sahib*? They injure the hooves of our goats."

"But we need these structures along with the new tree plantations," Mishraji said. "Gradually, the roots of the trees we plant will start holding the soil and then the roots and the soil together will capture the rain water. The idea is to find suitable answers to all problems. I do not have them just now but maybe..."

Tempers grew as hot as the midday sun as villagers and visitors argued heatedly. Both sides could not see the other's view point.

Daulat Ram said sternly, "The people of Chandigarh are very rich. We will continue to send mud and they will continue to remove it. We are poor and have no other way to survive but to graze our animals and get some income."

"No, no - our aim is to help everybody."

"You people are again pretending to help us villagers just because you have a problem with your drinking and bathing water. You feel you can come here and set it right — but just for yourselves. Selfish, is what I call it. How come you city folks have not bothered about our trees and land and water during the last ten-fifteen years?"

Bhai Saheb's words conveyed the thoughts of all the villagers present.

PARTAP AND MISHRAJI CELEBRATE LORI

Lori fires cast a glow on the silhouettes of the huts of Sukhomajri. The winter of 1976 was severe in Haryana with the evenings misty and cold.

Two tents had been pitched near the mango tree and the team from Chandigarh was working amid the mud gullies trying to find answers to their problems. This was their second winter in the area.

"I've finished the entry in the log book, sir" said Anwar. "We should be joining the folks around the bonfire to celebrate the coldest night of the year. I believe there will be lots of singing. This will be my first *Lori*. Last year I went home on leave."

"Yes, we should. Thanks for the book. You go ahead. I will come in a short while," said Mishraji, glad to have a few moments to himself.

Sitting on a stump he gazed at the silent beauty of the night. Twinkling lights of house-lamps and fires were seen in many homes and villages across the countryside creating an unreal effect.

The wind carried the piercing howls of jackals from the surrounding fields and hills. These jackals often preyed on the village goats adding to the hardships of the people.

Mishraji reflected on the events and on their work in the past year. It had been a time of hard work battling nature and the resistance from the villagers.

He recalled that a few months ago the team had found that many of the wooden structures and brushwood fences they had erected to prevent soil erosion had been uprooted and broken. The wood for the fences kept disappear-

ing almost every two days.

The villagers continued to show their anger and opened paths for their goats to graze in the forest area and the open lands belonging to the village *panchayat*. From these lands they also cut their requirements of firewood.

Every so often there would be an uproar as villagers and team members shouted at each other. Neither side could understand the other's needs and lifestyle.

Since the work began, Mishraji was convinced that efforts to conserve eroded lands could be successful only if he could assure the village people of a reasonable standard of living from the little land that they had.

That, he realised, was the real challenge.

A sudden commotion broke out and loud voices broke into his thoughts. He could hardly believe his eyes.

He saw mild-mannered Anwar dragging Partap along and admonishing him loudly, "That's all you folks can do. Why do you steal our fences and break the structures that have been built? None of you tries to understand the ideas behind our work. You boys are the real truants."

"What now?" sighed Mishraji, holding his head.

"I needed the big logs you people had stacked at the far end for our *Lori* fire," Partap said. "I thought I could take it from there rather than climb all the way to the forest."

Looking sideways at Mishraji, he continued "Are we not allowed any wood even for our festival?"

"Oh, come on, of course you are allowed wood for *Lori*," said Mishraji. "If we keep our use of wood to just this festival once each year, we will have lots of wood. Both of you should not be angry. Come, Partap, you tell me what happened."

Wrapping his scarf tightly around his head, Partap started to relate his side of the story. Anwar left the two of them together and went to join the singing around the bonfire.

Mishraji listened patiently and then said, "Partap, you must be very happy roaming these hills and forests. What do you see when you are walking around?"

Partap was very surprised. Why was Mishraji pretending to be calm? Why was

he not angry? For after all, he had been caught trying to pick up their wood.

"Yes, it's fun, but not always," Partap said. "I have to look after the goats and I cannot always roam whenever I want to. We don't go too high where the trees are. That takes time, but, yes, it is beautiful and cool in the forest up in the hills. The last time I went up I saw men cutting up those beautiful, big trees and throwing the logs down on the slopes. So, why do you trouble us for cutting branches and shrubs? Our goats only graze on sparse grass."

Mishraji closed his eyes in deep thought and explained, "Beautiful things must be cared for. As you just said the forests are beautiful. Your forefathers lived here in harmony with nature and took only what they



needed. We allow our most precious natural resource — the annual rain — to just flow away carrying the top soil and creating barren wastelands."

"Trees hold our soil together and enrich it," Mishraji continued, "vegetation captures the rain water in the earth, which keeps the soil moist and healthy for long. Rain water seeps underground and stops our streams and wells from drying up. But, nowadays modern man has taken much, without even a thought for replacing the trees or caring for the land and the natural waters. This carelessness is the cause of your mud gullies."

"*Sahibji*, but the rain water just falls. How will we collect it?"

"First, we'll dig up the ground and form tanks with a strong earthen wall on the one side. Then, we'll collect in it every drop of rain and in this way harvest our water," explained Mishraji.

"And then....?"

"I'll tell you the rest later, but you must come and spend some time with me and the other team members."

"All the elders say that you people are only trying to help yourselves, to get benefits for the *shahar*."

"That's not true. Sometimes, many things start off in a direction to solve a particular problem. Maybe through sharing our work and ideas we can all benefit. Not only the city folks and I, but also the village people and even you, Partap."

Young, lanky Partap looked up at Mishraji.

Though just 14, he was nearly as tall.

The older man put his arm around the boy's shoulders and said, "You are an intelligent boy. Come, let's go to the village and celebrate *Lori*."

The community bonfire at the entrance to the village was burning bright and its high flames crackled in the wind. The villagers, clad in shawls and patched blankets, squatted around the blaze, some singing, and others huddled in small groups. Missing was the traditional luxury of throwing puffed rice and jaggery *reoris* into the fire.

The guests from the city stood in a hesitant group a short distance away. But Mishraji and Partap joined the ring of dancers around the fire, matching their steps to the rhythm of the *dholak* and the clapping hands.

Revelling in the warmth of the bonfire, they looked at each other and smiled. They seemed to have reached an understanding to help each other — a tribute to the festival of thanksgiving that *Lori* represents.



THE WATER IN THE EARTHEN DAM

Sukhomajri had late winter rains after *Lori*. Six months later, water gleamed in the hot summer sun. The five boys went with their goats every day to the two small, earth dams where water was being collected. They had never seen so much water in their lives. The *sahibs* had been busy. Rows of stone steps and brushwood fences had been put into place on the hillsides to prevent mud from crumbling and breaking away. Freshly planted *kikar* and *katha* trees had taken root. By building simple, earth walls to prevent the water from flowing away uselessly, they had effectively dammed and collected the rain water.

But the villagers continued to show their anger at the work being done. The boys were sent to graze their goats on the sparse shrubs and, the check fences built by the *sahibs* were being constantly uprooted. Even the boys were split into two groups with Inder and Dalip complaining that Partap was spending too much time with the *sahibs* and pretending to be a grown-up.

Monu, however, did not feel the same. Turning to Partap, he said, "Where are your goats? Aren't you going to feed them? We are going higher up through the fences."

"I didn't bring them. I cut some grass on my way back from school yesterday and fed them."

"Why don't you like coming with us now? Aren't we all friends?"

Inder's voice rang out, "What's keeping you? Hurry."

"Why is he in a hurry?" Partap asked. "Just look at him and Dalip breaking these fences. I wish they would understand."

"Understand what, Partap?" queried Sonu "You've been behaving quite oddly these days."

Partap, however, had begun moving towards the boys who were breaking fences. "Arre, Inder, Dalip. Don't do this," he urged.

"Why not, big guy? You've become a stranger. No goats, no grazing, hardly any playing around. How do you light your fires without wood?"

"Look, *yaar*, it's not like that. I've been trying to understand all this work around our village. You know, it makes a lot of sense. These folks know what they are doing. They are concerned and I feel that we will all benefit and learn a lot."

"Stop giving us lectures. Just last winter you were caught taking these wooden posts. Remember, for the *Lori* bonfire. Now suddenly you've started talking to the *bada sahibs*, and even helping them with this crazy work," said Inder, standing hands on hips and fat legs planted firmly on the ground. With fixed gaze, he tried to bully Partap, who was six inches taller. "Imagine, trying to hold back hillsides and collect muddy water with shallow, earth dams! *Gaddaar!*"

"That's not fair," complained Partap. He continued, "Don't you realise the hardships of our elders. The last crop was so meagre. We'll have to sell our goats this season. They must be fed and fattened before that. I have been watching their conservation work, we have to stop this soil from being washed away and making barren gullies. Only then can we get good land for crops and fodder." Partap hoped he could win over his friends to the new ways of thinking and working.

"*Bhashan, bhashan,*" sneered Inder, "How can we let these fancy experiments and fences stand in the way of our lifestyle?"

Monu urged, "Let's at least hear him."

"I heard that it is trees that will prevent land slides and bring the rains," Partap said "Somehow, we also have to hold this loose soil. I suppose these dams, fences and trenches are for that reason. Once the trees take root and hold the land, we may be able to remove these supports."

"Hah, clever, clever!" said Dalip. "These city folks are so silly, doing double work. Have you noticed that trees are planted near this earth wall where the tank has water. But the other one has no trees. They seem to have cheated on that work. They seem to be wasting their time and effort. That tank has slushy, muddy water. You can hardly call it water!"

"But," replied Partap, "do you see why there is water in this tank -- only because they did all this. The other tank is experimental. It has no fence and no trees have been planted there. It already has mud sediment filling it up at an alarming rate."

"This sounds interesting. Let us know more," said Dalip.

"I don't know all the answers, but I am going to try and learn. I'm beginning to understand that if we cut trees and if our animals overgraze the lands, our soil will keep getting washed away. We

have to try and find a solution ourselves and not depend on others."

"This does not make any sense."

"Already you can see that the collection of water in these earth dams is saving the land from crumbling in just one year. Also, have you noticed how well the *shisham* trees and *bhabar* grass have started growing around this area? I suppose there must be more moisture in the soil."

"I like seeing this tank full of water. I've never seen so much of it before in all these years."

"But, the point remains the same. How do we — the people of this village — benefit? What will we get out of these barricades and trees?" asked Inder.

"Look at it the other way," Partap replied. "We might get something out of this collected water. One good monsoon and the dam should be full."

"The water is for their study," Inder complained. "They will never give it to us for our use."

"May be, may be not," said Monu.

"Why not? It's in our village. May be we could use it for our fields," said Partap.



VILLAGERS VISIT THE CAMP

"The rains have again passed us by and, God forbid I think that once more we are not going to have any *makka* for our own use. There has not been extra grain to sell in the *mandi* for quite some years," an anxious *Bhai Saheb* said cleaning his teeth with a *neem* twig. He and Daulat Ram were talking early in the morning.

The hot, dry summer had lingered on for long and a sticky stillness pervaded the air for the cool breeze from the higher hills had also disappeared. Eyes turned frequently to the horizon searching for rain clouds.

"You don't have to bite into your *datun* so hard," said Daulat Ram, "I've been thinking,... should I try and get more water for growing our crops or should I again buy more goats for rearing and selling."

Even though they were alone, Daulat Ram spoke in a whisper. "How about approaching these Chandigarh city folks who come and live here ever so often. We can ask them..."

"Ask them? What?"

"For the use of all that water collected in the far tank. If they give us some, we can water our fields by digging small *naalees*," said Daulat Ram.

"If..." sneered *Bhai Saheb*. "Why would you ever think they would share it with us?"

"Partap gave me this idea. The boy is growing up and talks quite sensibly when we are at home in the evening. He is also mixing with these city people and learning some of their ideas, which he shares with me. A few make a lot of sense, especially when I look back over the past 15 or 20 years and see the many drastic changes."

"There are another two months to go before sowing," *Bhai Saheb* reminded.

"Yes, we have the time. Let's discuss this with all the people."

"But, you do know that many of our people are angry with the city folk," warned *Bhai Saheb*.

"No harm having a *baithak* and starting a dialogue. After all, water and crops are important to everyone of us. If we all get together to tackle the problem, I'm sure they will help us."

A week later, Partap led a group of village elders to the tents of the intruders.

Mishraji and his colleagues were bent over many sheets of maps. All around were bottles with soil samples and saplings of *khair* and *shisham* trees and *bhabar* grass, all of which had been planted in the trenches to help keep the soil from breaking up.

The sound of voices and approaching footsteps made them look up and they showed their gladness at seeing the villagers.

"*Sahibji, Sahibji*," said Partap. "My uncles want to talk to you. I brought them here assuring them that you would understand and consider their request."

"Partap, this is very nice," Mishraji replied. "I always welcome your visits. You are very enterprising to bring them to our tents. But if you had said so I would have personally come to your houses."

"That is very kind of you, sir. We wanted your guidance in one of our basic problems."

"*Hahn, bolo*, how can we help you?"

All seven villagers came closer, with hands folded.

Young Partap was beaming, brimming with confidence at being in the centre of the village discussion and at the trust his elders had placed in him.

Daulat Ram brought up the subject. "*Sahib*, do understand our problems. The rains this year have not come. The thing we need most is water. If only we can have a few years of good crops, maybe we will still survive these unhappy years."

"Come to the point, Daulat Ramji," piped in *Chacha*.

Mishraji, with a patient smile, gestured to everyone to sit and asked, "Yes, yes, what is it?"

"We were wondering if we could use the water, that has been collected in the far tank. We could irrigate our fields when we sow the *rabi*."

"We will do the work, *Sahibji*," Partap assured enthusiastically. "We will dig the *naalees* and whatever else you say."

Getting up from the case on which he was sitting Mishraji clasped Daulat Ram's hands. With emotion and in a voice loud enough for all to hear, he said "Brothers, this is not your water or my water. It is *our* water."



SOME MONTHS LATER....

"Wah, bayee, wah!" came the loud echo of the strains of a popular Punjabi folk song. It was sung enthusiastically to the beat of the *dholak*.

A festive air swept through the village because water was now flowing to the fields. Winter wheat, dark green in colour, swayed in the warm sunlight under clear, blue skies.

It had been an eventful year with many changes for Partap and his friends. They looked back with pride to the day when Mishraji had taught them how to lay aluminium pipes and dig small drains.

What excited them most was learning all about the pump-engine that lifted water from the tank through pipes and into the ready drains. The boys considered themselves expert mechanics, having worked with Anwar and others connecting wires and switches. The starting whirr of the pump and the water gushing out of the tank were experiences that would be etched forever in their minds.

Bhai Saheb, Gurindar Kaur and others were talking amongst themselves, and said they could anticipate a harvest of three or even four times the usual output which was fantastic. All it needed was water at the right time.

Daulat Ram broke away from the singing and approached Mishraji, "I can show you another good site, further, in the larger gullies for a bigger dam," he said. "There we can collect a greater amount of water."

"Bahut achaa!" Mishraji exclaimed. "You also realise the powerful potential of water!"

"Pani — it is life-saving — for people, their crops and their cattle,"

"A second dam is a good idea," Mishraji

commented. "Will you all help?"

Others joined in the conversation and the singing was forgotten. *Masi* kept playing her *dholak* and all the small children clapped their hands in rhythm. Many of the villagers spoke out their feelings and ideas.

"We will all contribute and work towards the building of this bund."

"Anything for water."

"If we get water we can concentrate on the *kheti*."

"Imagine all that water being wasted for so many years."

"Even the birds have returned this year with the water and the trees."

"We will build this dam with our own hands!"

Then, *Chacha* came forward leading two goats, "I am going to Kalka to sell these two just now. The money I get, I shall give towards building this dam," he vowed.

"Done!" said Mishraji enthusiastically. "If we all work together, success will be ours."

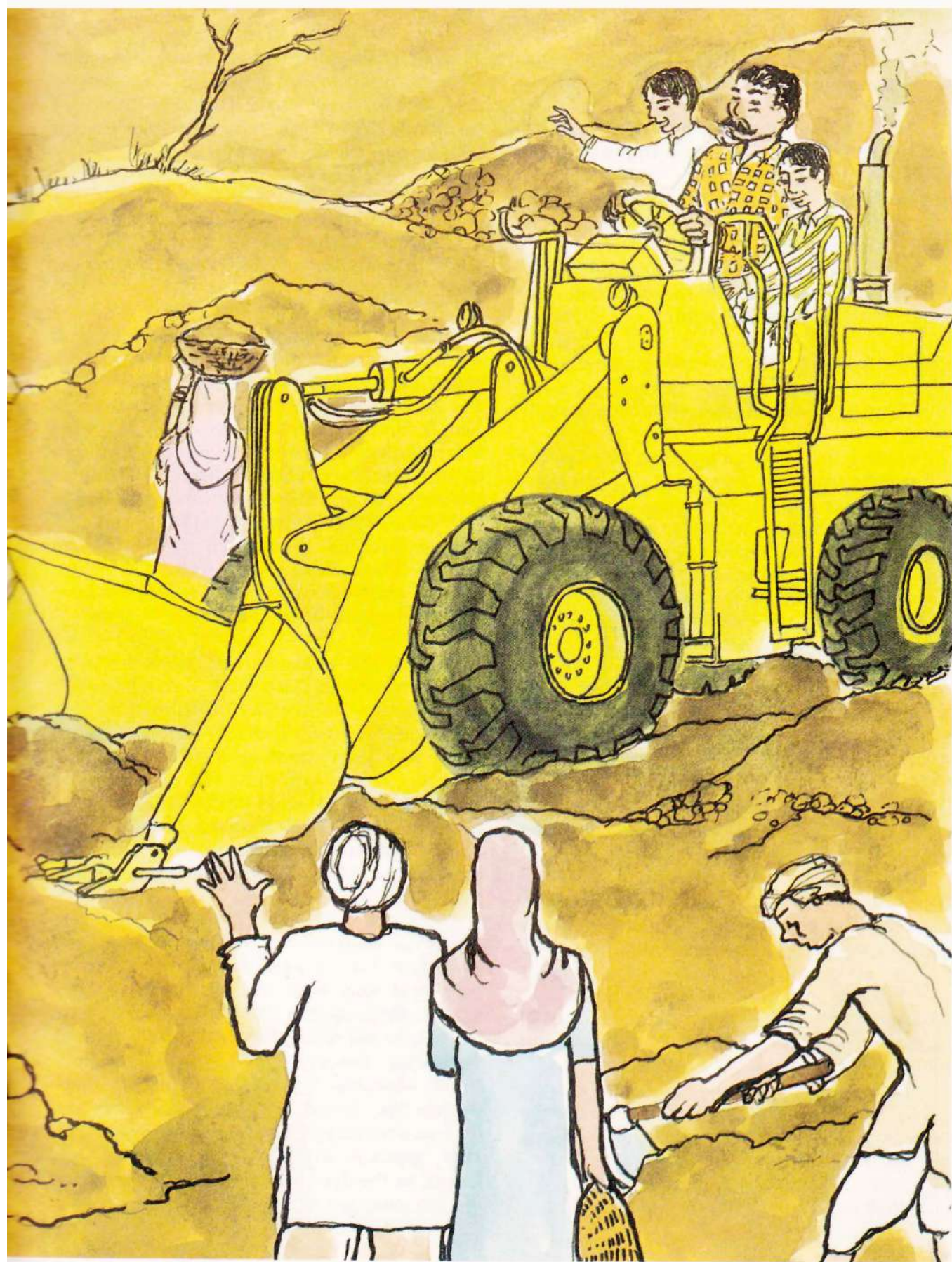


THE BUILDING OF THE SECOND DAM

The hills and valleys echoed with the rumble of the bulldozer, a big, yellow machine. All the villagers were assembled at the site of the new dam. It was to be built on higher ground away from the village and nearer the hills. There was excitement in the air.

The bulldozer scooped up large quantities of earth, many basketfuls in one scoop. It dropped the earth, piling it neatly into a heap and packing tightly to form an earth wall. The villagers watched excitedly and were amused at the working of the *peeli* machine. The air was full of swirling dust.





"Arre! Dekho! in one hour it has done the work that twenty would do in a whole day."

"I wish this machine had arrived earlier. We've been digging for weeks trying to create this wall...."

"Rab da shukar karo, don't grumble," said Masi to the men-folk.

"Will we really be able to collect rainwater here? Will the mud wall hold?"

"Look, look! So much earth in one scoop."

"Looks like an animal with long arms!"

During the long hot summer months, the villagers' spare time was spent on the dam. Using spades and shovels, the residents of Sukhomajri worked willingly and very hard for their water. Families brought their *rotis* tied in napkins with *lotas* filled with *lassi*. Everyone shared the food and there was excitement in the air. The entire area looked like a huge bowl, from which mud was being scooped to form the wall.

"Daulat Ramji, can you imagine the lake full of water? How many rains will we need to fill this huge area?"

"The other side seems so far away. We cannot even recognise the people who are standing there."

"Naturally, you can see the large area that has been dug up. It must be much more than the acres you and I own together."

"Kartare, this wall has had so much mud packed into it. It has now become as hard as concrete. We should plant trees and grass on the far slopes to hold the soil."

"Look at the large area outside the circular boundary of this new lake. We will be able to plant a lot of trees and grass in it."

"Just look at the boys, they are smart!"

Partap and Monu were up in the machine with the driver. "I'm going to learn how to drive one of these," said Partap, planning for his future. "Then I can build dams in every village for miles around."

Monu said nervously, "Every time the front arm of this strange, huge machine lifts up in the air with tonnes of mud, I feel I am going to crash down and get packed into the wall!"

The driver was a large, pleasant man with thick moustaches and a bold yellow check shirt. He was enjoying himself, scooping up the earth before so many excited and eager people. Smiling at Monu, he said, "Don't get worried, *beta*. You can't get lifted from the driver's seat. See, I control the movement of the big crane arm from here. Would you like to try?" Monu was thrilled. Partap bent forward, hoping he'd also be allowed to steer the machine. The village elders and the boys' friends clapped and a chorus of "*Shabash, shabash*" rang through the air.

Soon, the villagers welcomed the rains, ending months of hard work through the hot, dry summer. Water started filling up the large area, forming a new lake. Grass sprouted at the lake edge, creating a natural check to erosion. *Katha* saplings, *bhabar* grass and other specially planted shrubs held together the trenches and the sloping sides near the dam. The earth wall forming the dam bund retained the water, much to the excitement of the people.

Three seasons of good rains followed and only then did the new lake fill up. A large pipe was laid from the lake to carry water to the fields below the high ground. Then, water flowed through a network of pipes, quenching the dry earth, making the land come alive and turning the fields into a green carpet. No longer was Sukhomajri dry and brown. Everywhere one looked, one could see only green — in plants that sprouted new leaves, in the dyed *chunnies* and in the tassels of the *parandeas* of the village girls.

THE VILLAGE WOMEN GET TOGETHER

"Partap, Partap! Hey, wait for me," called Monu, limping down the path as he still found it difficult to run or walk fast.

Partap looked back with a smile and waited. Partap and Monu had built a strong bond of friendship over the years.

"Where are you going?" asked Monu. "Can I come along, too? I've been wanting to talk to you about many things."

Monu said, "Life in our village has changed so much. Today, half the village is rich, while the other half still makes a living from keeping goats. Sometimes I feel like running away."

Partap placed a brotherly hand on Monu's shoulder and said, "It is sad that the water has created so much tension. Look at our friends, Inder and Dalip. Their lands lie on the other side of the village road which have the water pipes. In these last two and a half years, the dam water has reached their *kheti*, making them prosperous."

"Yes, they have sold all their goats, bought four buffaloes for milk and are now growing rice in their fields. My mother says that it is very unfair, as it uses up so much water."

"Let's see," replied Partap. "I'm going to peep into the meeting. Are you coming?"

Partap and Monu made their way through the entire length of the village. They passed Inder's house whose mud walls had given way to brick and, the old steps at the far end of the outer wall now led to a set of new rooms on the first floor. The walls had latticed windows and the pattern was repeated on the railing at the edge of the terrace.

Four buffaloes were tethered in a covered

shed by the far wall near the steps. Walls painted pink, yellow and green added a finishing touch to the new *pucca* house.

Through the open door, the boys could see wheat-packed *boris* stacked in the courtyard.

During the past year Inder had become aloof. Though he waved to them from the roof, he did not come down to join them.

Partap and Monu reached the door of Gurindar Kaur's house. Taking off their *jutees* they walked into the *veda*, where they were immediately noticed by the women gathered there.

"These boys have become young men now, but still keep intruding everywhere."

"Yes, even to an all-women gathering!" remarked a large, well-built woman, who was the village landlady. "You two should go away. We don't want you interfering."

"*Namaste*," said the boys bowing their heads, and touching the feet of the elderly women present.

"Please allow us to sit," urged Partap. "We are so interested. We know what you are going to discuss. We shall certainly not interrupt. All we want is to listen and learn." Then he sat down with Monu in a corner.

The women talked constantly amongst themselves and this pleased Manju because she had been trying to create a feeling of togetherness among them. She enjoyed talking to the village women though they did not have as much spare time as Manju would have wished.

Manju's voice broke into the chatter filling the small house. "You have had water flowing

to your fields for the last two years, thanks to the second big dam. This must make you feel happy."

"Water? Happy? We don't get any water," responded Gurindar Kaur in an accusing tone. "It is given only to a few, and that too, in exchange for a bottle of liquor."

"Hahnji, bhainji. It is true. Only a few households have benefitted," added another.

But the fat landlady, adjusting her new nylon *dupatta* over her head, said very loudly, "They are exaggerating. Everyone gets some of it. After all, water is for the landed people as it always has been."

"Why should she agree? She gets more water than she needs for her lands."

"Anyway, the landed always get the water. Those who have more land get more

water. That's been the rule for centuries."

Manju was surprised to hear so many of the women expressing such strong views. It was obvious they had overcome their inhibitions and were speaking freely about the feelings in their households.

Trying to appear impartial, she said, "We'll have to gather all the facts. Maybe we women can take the lead and start a new system."

Gurindar Kaur responded, a note of cynicism in her voice. "What new system, *Bhainji*? You people keep saying we must stop grazing our goats in the common forest area..."

Another villager interrupted "Sorry, but I do not agree. Why should we give up our goats and grazing rights. After all, for what benefits? Only a few are prospering because of water."



"*Bhainji*, you must explain this to the *Bada Sahib*. What have we gained from two dams? We have not got a river full of water."

The fat landlady and her friends were clearly angry. There were now two distinct groups and they all sat on the floor, waving their hands and talking very loudly in their excitement.

After serving water to all present, Gurindar Kaur said, "My man was very angry when a few weeks ago, your team members stopped him from grazing his goats. He said that you outsiders had no business to interfere in our traditional rights, especially when it was us villagers who allowed you to do your work on our village common land in the first place."

Dalip and Sonu had come meanwhile and were sitting near Partap and Monu. Dalip whispered to Partap, "This is the direct result of encouraging and talking to the city folks. You took their side then and after all that trouble, what have you gained? You, too, have nothing to show."

A surge of anger against his friend rose in Partap. "All that I did was not for any personal gain. It's you people on the other side who are being greedy about the use of water though you are prospering from it. You are consuming more and more water now, what with rice and even sugarcane crops. Do you think you are being fair?"

"Each one to his own luck!" exclaimed Dalip. "When we get water, why not use it?"

The women turned to the boys and the evergentle *Masi* spoke at the meeting for the first time, "I think we had better solve this problem," she said. "We can't have divisions and tensions amongst our children, too."

Manju and the others nodded their heads but Gurindar Kaur was still angry.

"Last year there was such a terrible *sookha*," she said. "All our crops withered. Only those households that got the dam water ended up with full granaries. I swear I will take my cattle to the dam and damage it. I wish the dam would break one day."

Manju intervened, "Please, *bhainji*, do not get angry. Let's talk to the men also."

The fat landlady got up in a huff. "I think I should leave. We cannot break away from following set social patterns. The next thing these women will be saying is that water should be given to the landless and that water pipes should be laid all over the village for free supply of water to all. How can this be done?"

There was total silence in the courtyard. Everyone looked at the woman, who stood dressed in a gaudy, multicoloured, flowered print *salwar-kameez* and her nylon *dupatta*. Then, everybody started talking at once.

"What a good idea. We never thought of that."

"Poor woman, she has unwittingly given us food for thought."

Masi got up slowly and wiping her face with her plain *dupatta*, said, "Yes, my friend, yes. You have given us a brilliant idea. We can do just that. I think every family whether landed or landless, should get equal water. How we do it has to be worked out. We, the villagers, must control the distribution of the water and not the *babu*. Also, it is high time we stopped fighting amongst ourselves and managed our own affairs and resources. We can do it, if we get together. That way not only will the village benefit, but we and our children, too."

Masi's emotional outburst left everyone speechless. Monu and Sonu looked proudly at their mother. Partap's face was full of hope.

THE MAKING OF THE SOCIETY

The village meeting was over and *kullars* of hot *chai* were being passed around by Partap and his friends to the large gathering whose excited chatter filled the air.

The area around the mango tree was packed. The villagers had gathered there — the moneylender, the potter, the ironsmith, the cobbler, the carpenter and the descendants of the original nomadic shepherds. For the first time ever, even the women and the children were there, for today, they had decided the fate of the village and their own future. The people had changed their age-old method of water distribution.

"Let's celebrate!" shouted *Bhai Saheb*. "A good monsoon, lots of water collected and now a new society of our own. 1980 has been a good year!" He got up and started the *bhangra*.

Gurindar Kaur and *Masi* led their friends down a small path leading to the village. Excitement showed on *Masi's* face as she said, "It just goes to show that when all the people take interest and decide to act together, problems become so simple to solve."

Turning to Manju, Gurindar Kaur said, "*Bhainji*, I'm so glad I could fulfil my promise to you. All the women have come forward. It was our first experience of talking in front of the men of our village in a meeting. Now, we are confident that we can take part in all the affairs of our village."

Manju smiled. She, too, had been surprised. "I could never have imagined that solutions to our problems could be found so easily."

Masi could not stop showing her joy and said in amazement, "I just cannot believe each family will get an equal share in the water. And, you know it does not depend on the size, or the location of their land."

"The menfolk were saying that water will



cost us only four rupees per hour of use."

The women lingered at the doors of their houses, trying to work out how they would benefit and what changes would come in their lives. It was a long time and nearly dark before they stopped talking and went into their respective homes.

The menfolk, however, stayed on under the mango tree. Partap, Sonu and Monu were busy distributing the second round of tea. Re-

tying his turban, *Bhai Saheb* turned to *Chacha* and said, "Now, if any household is found grazing its goats in the common forest areas, they will lose their right over the water. This is a very good rule."

Partap piped in, "There is more news. The society will get registered with the government. Then its work is going to be looked after by one member from each family. With the earnings we get from the fee for water, we can improve our village."

Daulat Ram gleefully slapped his son on the back and said, "More than that, we'll get rid of all those horrible trenches and fences on the forest lands. Not only will we have the responsibility of keeping our animals from grazing there, but we'll be looking after the dams, the hillsides and we'll distribute water by laying more pipes."

Chacha was thinking very hard. "We'll have to exchange our goats for buffaloes. Now we'll be able to sell milk. Can we cut fodder from the forest?"

"Yes, that too can be worked out."

A beaming Mishraji embraced Daulat Ram and said, "It is amazing that you all reached the same conclusion as us. This is a wonderful achievement."



THE MIRACLE OF SUKHOMAJRI

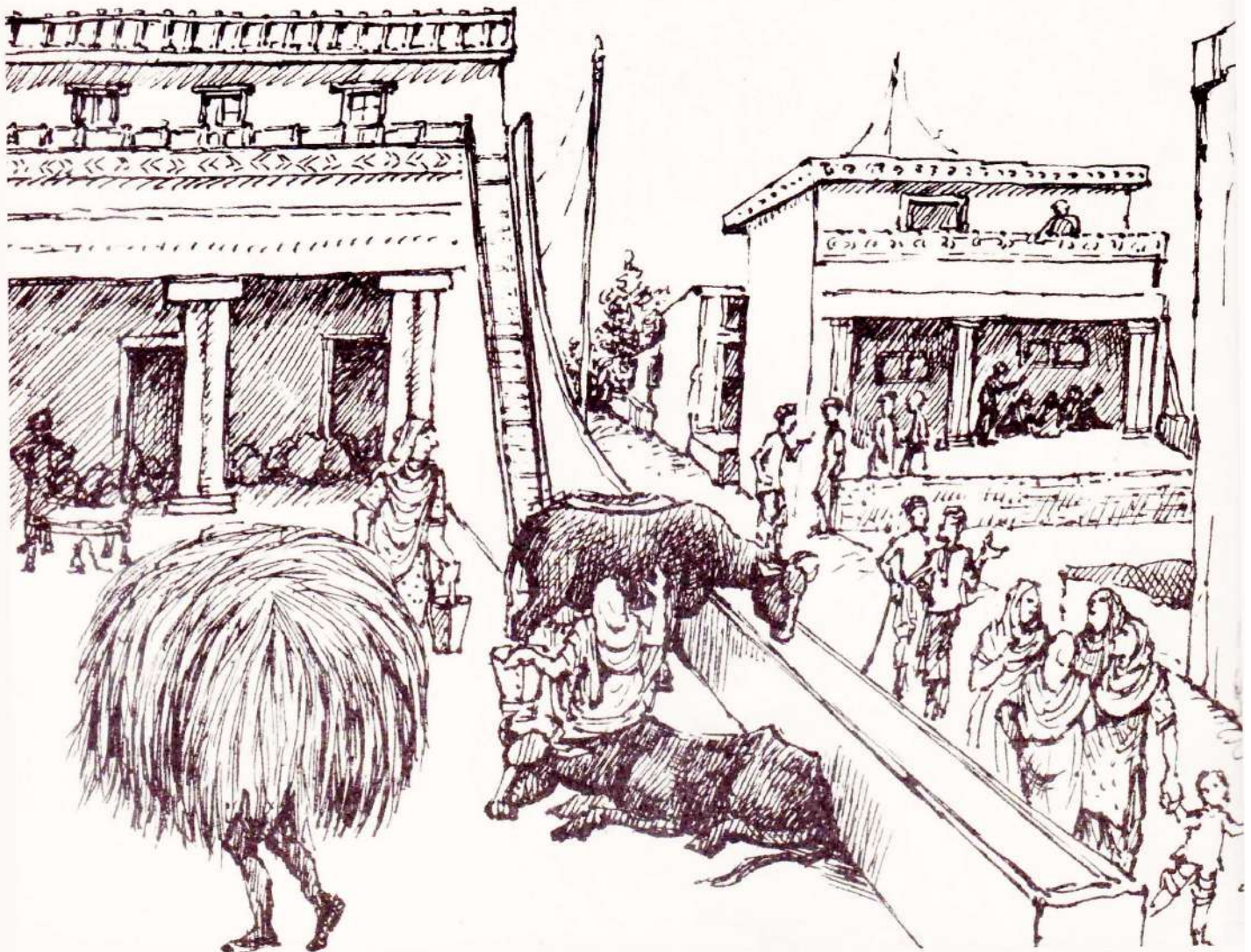
Sukhomajri village with its green fields and pink and yellow houses resembled a large painting done by a keen artist. The once-eroded hillsides and fields looked renewed with shades of green from new vegetation and trees.

Bhai Saheb and Chacha are proud of their pucca brick houses and Monu and Sonu now sleep in the newly-added upper rooms, with lattice designs on their windows and balconies, overlooking bountiful fields of wheat and mustard.

The courtyards of the village homes are bustling with activity at dusk. The women are busy, lighting the fire to cook a meal of fresh vegetables from their own farmlands. With wheat now in surplus, Monu and Sonu enjoy eating their favourite *tandoori rotis* that Masi is forever feeding them, along with homemade butter, *lassi* and *tamatar salad*.

The buffaloes have ushered in a revolution!

A senior villager is often heard saying: "Whenever I look at the water in the dam, I see milk!"





Gurindar Kaur is very caring of her buffaloes, which she keeps in a specially erected shed just outside her window. She still remembers the day she sold all her goats to buy a buffalo. Today, with four, feeding and cleaning them was hard work but it is all worthwhile, for the extra litres of milk augment her daily income.

Masi still visits each household to discuss the wonder of the *chakra* of events. She collects the children under the mango tree and repeats the popular story, starting her tale with Mishraji's words "hold every drop of water where it falls and your village will turn green and rich."

Drawing a circle on the ground with her finger, Masi points out that in a village one thing always leads to another. Weaving stories around her moving finger, she recounts how water brought more trees, crops and fodder to the village. With animals having enough to eat, there is milk to sell and more dung for fertiliser and better farming. By just caring for the forest, the circle is complete. More fodder and fuel, and surprisingly, more water, resulting in plentiful harvests opening up new markets, creating wealth and an improved lifestyle.

Masi never tires of telling this story of Sukhomajri and its regeneration.

Daulat Ram, Bhai Saheb and Chacha now have the time to sit on *charpais* and smoke their *hookah*. Through exciting dialogue — *baazis* and back-slapping laughter they exchange views on the affairs of the village. Daulat Ram and his friends produced wonders by promoting the feeding of buffaloes in their sheds and so protecting their forest lands from grazing. And so, brushwood and barbed wire gave way to voluntary social fencing.

In just ten years, the word Society, has become a part of the daily conversation of the young and the old of Sukhomajri. Life revolves around the small room and courtyard that serves as the office of the Society formed and managed by themselves to carry out all development work in and around the village.

The Society is clever, too! It earns an income by giving out contracts for grass-cutting and other forest produce. These funds have helped to bring a school, a clinic, more water pipelines and electricity to the village.





Poles and wires have brought "daylight into the night" in the village as *Bhai Saheb* often remarks. Lanes are lit with bare bulbs and tubelights brighten the interior of homes. Monu and Sonu hear their favourite songs on their transistor radio and Partap, Inder and Dalip are glued to their T.V. sets, whenever they get the time.

Few people leave the village now because with more fertile lands and an increase in animals there is more work at home. The villagers bustle with activity, happily living in harmony with the natural surroundings, as their ancestors had done for many generations.

Gone are the days of fighting and tension in the village, whose residents fondly remembered Mishraji's oft repeated remark "*Sab log lag jayo*. By protecting the common lands and the watershed, you'll prosper."

And, now, modern machines like harvesters and tractors roll down the dusty road to Sukhomajri. Entire families, young and old, take part in all the activities as these machines

stack the courtyards with bags of surplus wheat and separate fresh orange corn from their cobs. The *makka* is dried in the sun on mats spread in the small courtyards. Families pile on the tractors for an outing to the *mela* at Pinjore.

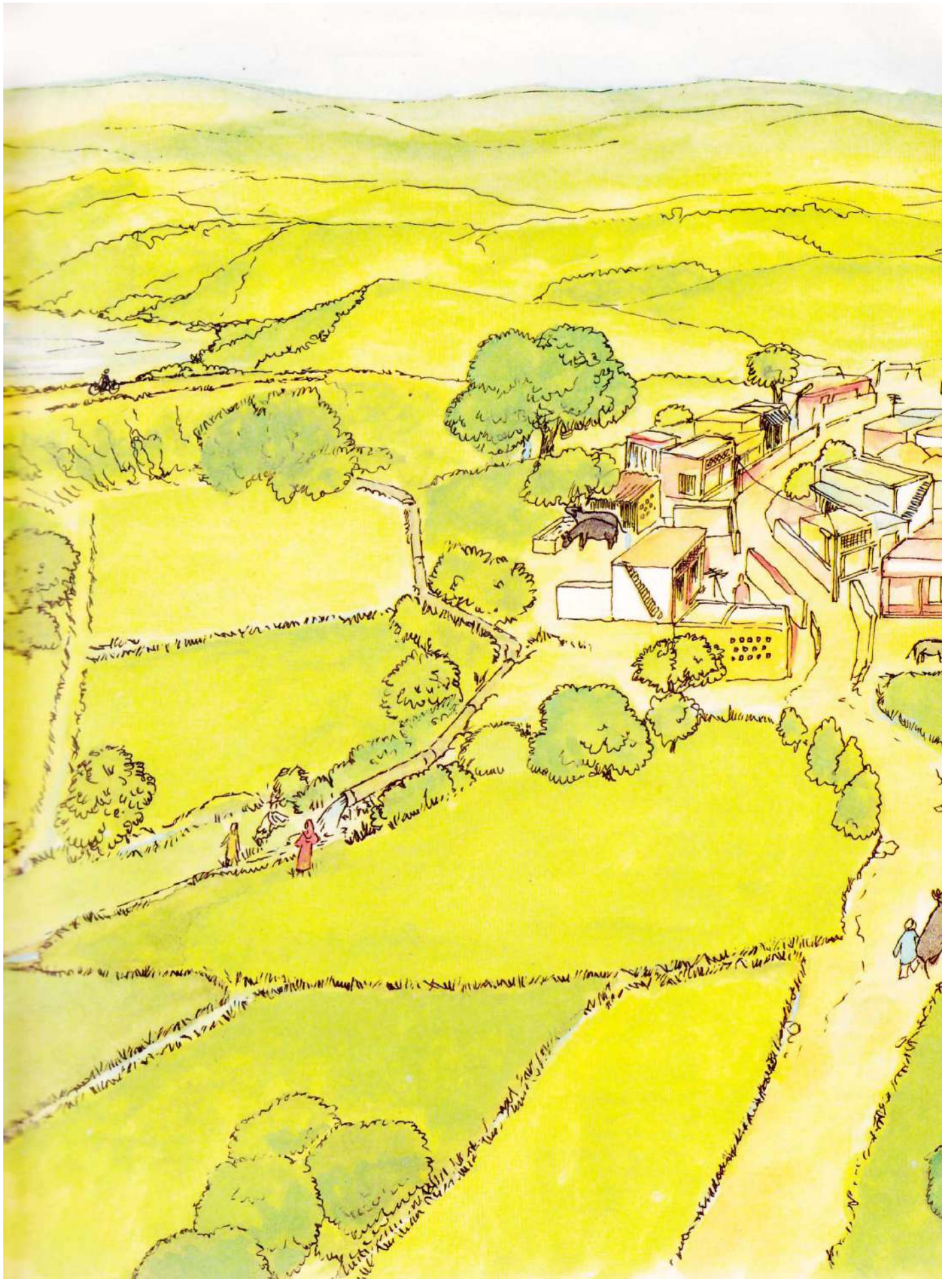
Partap is 20 now and a farmer marketing his vegetables at Pinjore. He is also a dairy worker caring for his five buffaloes that bring him a daily income from the sale of milk. He grows new shrubs and tree species on his land that will serve as raw material for a number of new industries. As a part-time helper and advisor to Mishraji's team he receives a salary. Partap is also a handy man much in demand in the village to drive tractors, repair pumps and even tinker with television sets and transistor radios.

But, above all, Partap assists his foster-father at the village Society office. Partap is forever learning and he takes an active part in improving the environment and the life style of his people.

Partap believes every tree is a poem and knows that if people care for nature, nature will take care of them.

Today, Sukhomajri is a living legend, showing the way to many other villages in other parts of the country.





GLOSSARY OF HINDI/PUNJABI WORDS USED IN THE STORY

afsar, afsar log	officer/s	lori	a winter festival celebrated in Punjab and Haryana
arre dekho!	look here!	lota	a round metal container/ utensil
baazi	session/turn	makka	maize
babus	clerks/petty officials	mandi	wholesale market for grain
bachao!	help!	masi, masiji	aunt
bada	big	matka	a round earthen container
bahut achaa!	very good!	mela	village fair
baithak	meeting	memsahib	educated urban lady
bauji	father	mere bache!	my children!
bazaar	market	naalee	drain/field channel to carry irrigation water
beta	son	namaste	Indian greeting with folded hands
beti	daughter	neem	tree, AZADIRACHTA indica
bhabar	grass, Eulaliopsis binata	pagri	turban
bhai, bhai saheb	elder brother	panchayat	village administration
bhainji	sister	pani	water
bhangra	a Punjabi folk dance	parandee	decoration made of cotton used with plaits
bhashan	lecture	patwari	government officer who looks after village revenue or land records
bolo	tell me	peeli	yellow in colour
bori	jute bag	pucca	proper/strong
chacha, chachaji	uncle	rabi	spring harvest
chaddar	sheet/thick shawl	rab da shukar karo!	Thank the Lord!
chakra	circle/cyclic	rab rakha!	May God protect you!
charpai	a rope bed commonly used in India, especially in rural areas	reori	a small, hard disc shaped sweet made with jaggery and sesame seeds
chai	tea	roti	Indian bread
cho	rainfed stream in the Shivalik range	sab log aayo!	everybody come!
chunni	a long scarf worn by women	sab log lag jayo!	everybody get together
danda	big, thick stick	sahib, sahibji	officer
datun	neem twig used for cleaning teeth	salwar kameez	name of costume worn by women in Punjab
dholak	an oblong shaped drum	sarkar, sarkari	government
dupatta	long scarf worn by women	shabaash!	well done!
gadhaar	traitor/one who betrays	shahar	city/town
hahn, hahnji	yes	shisham	tree, DALBERGIA
Hai Ram! Wahe Guru!	invoking the Lord in Hindi and Punjabi respectively	sookha	sissoo
haldi	turmeric	tamaatar	drought
ik, do, teen, char, panj	one, two, three, four, five	tandoori	tomato
jutee	leather shoe	veda	cooked dry in an earthen oven
kameez	long shirt for women	wah bayee wah!	courtyard
katha, khair	tree, Acacia catechu	yaar	wonderful/great (opening words used commonly in Punjab folk songs)
khes	hand woven bedspread		slang for friend
kheti	field		
kikar	tree, Acacia nicotica		
kheti-bari	farming/working in fields		
khullar	earthen cup		
ki hoya?	what's happened?		
kurta	knee-length shirt for men		
lassi	buttermilk		

